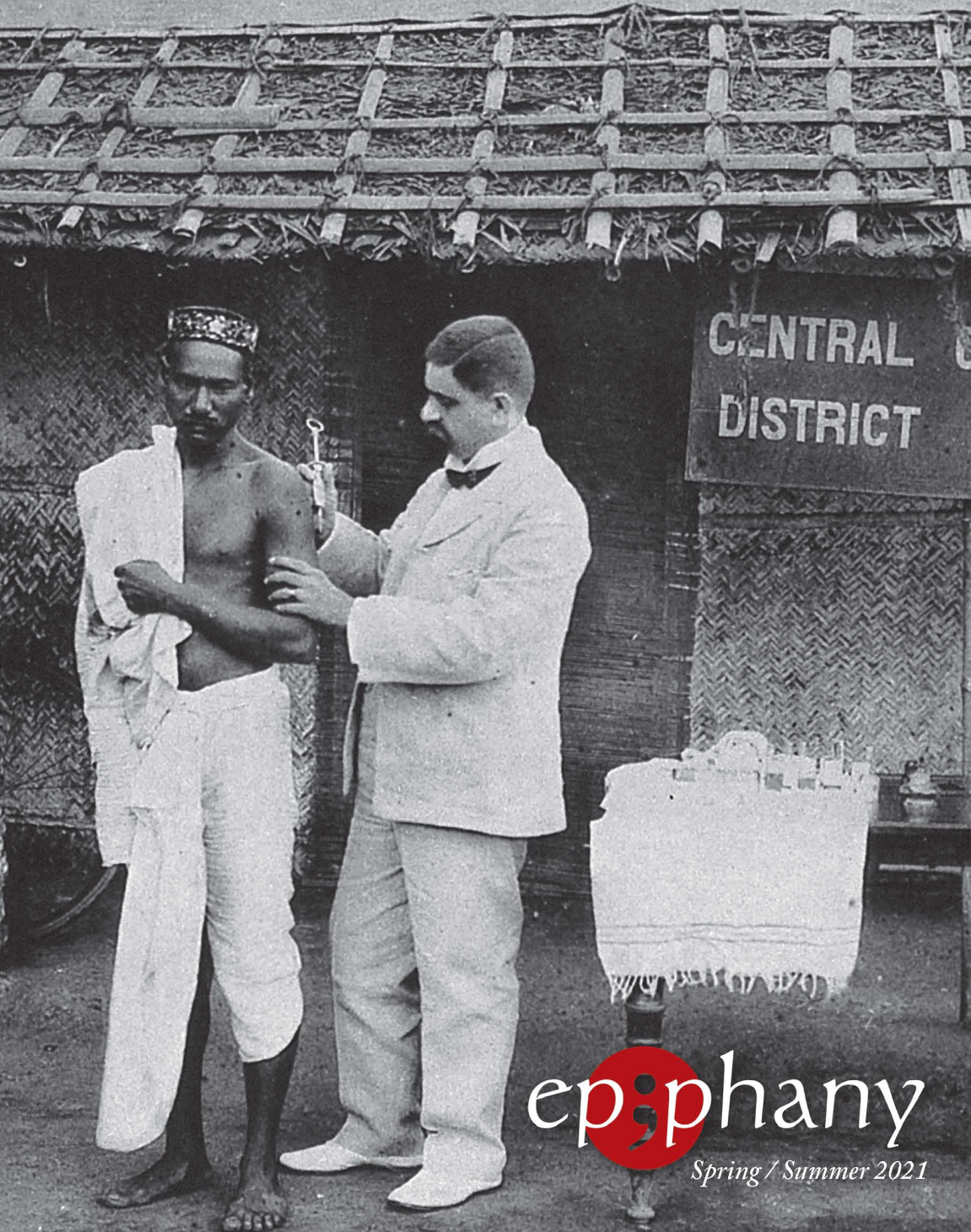


# THE EMPIRE ISSUE



epiphany

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INOCULATION AGAINST PLAGUE, BOMBAY.

## NIGHT VISIONS

*Gillon Crichton*

The desert tests the faith of even the most committed. When I received orders to deploy here, I imagined sand dunes and shimmering heat. But the Jordanian desert in February is unforgiving, its sandstone packed hard and cold. Strange rock formations pock the horizon, one blending into the other. The Valley of the Moon, the Jordanians call it.

In the hills above Aqaba, Gunny takes the hairpin turns with care. He glances over at me from time to time, concerned that I'm still awake. Bakr and Abed snore softly in the back. I know I should sleep, but the jagged cliffs are hypnotic and otherworldly. I avoid the glare of the headlights, keep my eyes trained on the distance, and though it is too dark to see more than general shapes and outlines, I sense the immensity of the desert, as if its scope can only be contemplated in the dim, grayscale images of night. In the lee of a cliff face, a smoldering fire briefly illuminates a makeshift Bedouin encampment—dark forms huddled around the fire, their camels tethered to a stake.

We press deeper into the hills, until Camp Durra comes into view: a slab of concrete for helicopters, two low-slung cinderblock compounds, and several large white tents. Behind the camp is a pistol and demolitions range and a few rusted out shipping containers. The makeshift armory is inside the main compound, and it's there that they keep the M240, the medium machine gun we'll take north to the border.

At the camp's gate, the jundi on watch are hunched over, knees pulled into their chests against the cold. A dust-covered humvee sits at an angle to the gate with a 50-caliber machine gun hanging idly in the turret. Gunny honks the horn and a lanky, ill-kempt private rises from the dirt and lifts the gate.

"No discipline," Bakr grumbles from the backseat. "Captain, when I was a lieutenant colonel, my men did not sleep on post."

We park at the main compound. The sun is just emerging over the hills, its light slanting across the sea that separates Jordan from Egypt. In the first light, before the sand kicks up and the heat thickens the air, the vastness of the desert comes into focus, at once bleak and austere.

"Thirty minutes," I tell Bakr and Abed. They wander off to the interpreters' tents—Abed spry and bony, Bakr with his faint, familiar limp. "Trust me, Captain," Bakr had told me when we hired Abed. "Trust me." Abed looked like a bundle of packed nerves, waiting outside the base gate for us to pick him up. But Bakr is our most reliable interpreter. I trust him.

I sit on the bumper of our Mahindra SUV and notice that they've built more fighting positions since I was last here. Sandbag barricades, concertina wire to establish a kill zone, prepositioned targets around the perimeter. But the positions are unmanned; probably only a single rifle at Durra is loaded. The jundi at the gate don't even load their magazines. Durra is one of those thousands of American military outposts whose primary purpose is to exist. Where any combat at all would signal catastrophe. Different for the marines on the border up north. The marines on the border don't just exist. For the marines on the border, a good fighting position means something.

The main compound's reinforced door grates open and Major Crews lumbers outside and smacks me on the shoulder.

"I hear you're taking my 240," he says. He's a large man, with a ridged brow and a big laugh, and when I visit Durra we spend the evenings on the roof, smoking cigars and pining for whiskey.

"As directed, sir."

"Don't give me that. You're taking my 240, yes or no?"

"Yes, sir."

His meaty hands fold into fists. "You realize what that leaves us with?"

I almost say something flip, but catch myself. His fighting positions may be unmanned, and in all likelihood unnecessary, but he's still built them. And after we take the machine gun, he'll still be out here, with jundi asleep at the gate, four shitty SUVs, and a half-platoon of marines armed with nothing heavier than a carbine.

"The border marines need a 240," I say, "and this is the only one in the country."

"And how many do they already have at the border?"

"Not enough."

He runs his hand through his hair—thinner than when we first deployed. "You understand what will happen if you get searched?"

"Yeah."

"Do you? You can't transport weapons in Jordan. Not without paperwork. This isn't Iraq. We don't own this country."

I glance down self-consciously where the pistol has dug into my thigh. There are fewer than a hundred marines in Jordan. Some wear civilian clothes, drive civilian SUVs, live in compounds like Durra or al-Saad; others are in combat on the border. We either take the gun today, or we wait three days for the Jordanians to issue transport paperwork. At Durra, three days means little more than three days closer to home. Three days on the border is something different. There's a war on the border. An actual war, not something hypothetical or dreamed of.

"We need to go," I tell him. He nods. The decision was already made by headquarters, anyways. He knows he doesn't have a choice.

We load up the Mahindra with the machine gun tucked under a ratty blanket and two cases of MREs, the ready-to-eat meals packaged years in advance. A knot in my chest tightens, and I second-guess our decision to keep Bakr and Abed in the dark. Better for them, I tell myself. Better to have nothing to hide from the security forces, no psychological indiscretion to be pried open.

"You want me to drive, sir?" Gunny asks.

"You drove all night," I tell him.

“But you didn’t sleep at all, sir.”

“Neither did you.”

I drop into gear and the same jundi raises the gate for us, his uniform unbuttoned and his rifle lying in the dirt. Bakr raises the back of his hand out the window and shouts in Arabic.

“Captain,” he says, “That jundi is an embarrassment to his family, to the King, and to Jordan.”

Abed smirks and curls up against the window.

We pass through the serpentine and I shift into third and let the Mahindra coast over the washboard. The sea shimmers before us, turning emerald in the morning light. Across the water, Egyptian resort towns nestle at the foot of a looming mountain range. One of those peaks is Mt. Sinai, sharp against the sky in the clear morning light—Jabal Musa, the mountain of Moses.

After several miles we hit the hardball and turn north towards Syria. Gunny keeps his eyes out for speed traps and I shift to fifth and start making time. We’ll take the highway as far as we can, a hundred-and-fifty miles northeast of Amman, but from there we won’t have any road to the border. Just a sea of gravel and rock, ungoverned and uninhabited, tucked between Syria on one side and Iraq on the other, traversed only by smugglers and security forces, and the occasional Bedouin. If we don’t reach the marines by nightfall, we’ll be stuck overnight, eating our MREs in the griping cold, one of us asleep while the other stands watch, and the marines will go another night without a machine gun.

For all its rattle, the Mahindra can fly, but the highway begins to clog with tanker trucks, ancient eighteen-wheelers smelling of exhaust and half-shot clutches. Jordanian highways all have three lanes, one in each direction and a center free-for-all. I weave in and out of the tankers, easing into the middle lane to judge oncoming traffic before cutting ahead.

Gunny whistles. “I still don’t get it, Bakr.”

“Gunnery Sergeant, my friend, we speak of this again?”

“It’s fucking stupid.”

Bakr smiles tightly. “My friend, some vehicles need to drive south, some vehicles need to drive north. Inshallah, they arrive where they must go.”



Abed uncoils in the backseat. “Very dangerous,” he says, “but very efficient.” He laughs, as if he has told a great joke.

Gunny spits in his dip cup and shakes his head. “Always with the inshallah.”

“Yes, inshallah,” Bakr says, annoyed. “What do we know of the will of Allah?”

The security forces checkpoint sits on the backside of a long curve, and even though we’ve been here a dozen times, it still takes me by surprise. The highway opens up into a broad plaza, feeding into twenty or so stations with guard huts and gates. Looming over the plaza is a monolithic security forces station, and several vast portraits of King Abdullah: Abdullah in uniform, Abdullah in business attire, Abdullah in a dishdashah. Only two gates are open, manned by officers with rifles and radios. They grip their rifles recklessly, fingers inside the trigger guard.

“Bakr, Abed,” I say, glancing nervously in the rearview mirror. “You good?” “Yes, Captain,” Bakr says. “Of course.”

“Abed?”

Abed chortles and renders a mock salute. “Yes, Captain. Reporting for duty.”

The officers halfheartedly glance inside the passing vehicles, then halt the truck in front of us: a Toyota Hi-Lux, with peeling paint, three men in the cab, and goats in the truck bed. Its chassis rides low under the weight. The officers grow clipped and angry and pull the three men from the truck.

“The officers think these men are smugglers,” Bakr says.

They canvass the cab and undercarriage and rummage through the men’s belongings. The men grumble and raise the backs of their hands. I keep both my hands on the steering wheel, and feel the pistol dig into my thigh.

“What are they looking for?”

Bakr shrugs. “Narcotics. Alcohol. Weapons.”

“Could be pornography,” Abed jokes.

Outside, an officer waves our Mahindra to the second gate. I shift into reverse too quickly and stall the engine, fumbling with the gearshift and the clutch. Abdullah stares down at us from his massive portraits. I pull into the second lane and the officer motions for me to stop. I’m seized with an image of the machine gun lying exposed, the blanket and MRE cases having shifted as we vibrated over the hardpan.

The officer leans down to the window, reeking of tobacco and body odor.  
“Salaam.”

“Salaam,” he says. “Amreekee?”

“Nam. Amreekee.”

He smiles and claps the Mahindra with his palm, then peers through the backseat window and speaks with Bakr and Abed in Arabic. Abed speaks exuberantly. I watch him in the mirror, with his tight skin and slight frame under a filthy Real Madrid jersey, overtaking the conversation, speaking over Bakr, who is measured and deliberate. Drawing attention, when we never want attention. Finally, Bakr puts a hand up.

“Captain,” he says. “Yes?”

“The officer wishes to know where we are going.”

“Amman.”

Bakr speaks briefly to the officer.

“Captain,” he says. “The officer asks if you make good purchase in Aqaba.”

“Yes, very good purchases.”

“Captain, the officer asks if perhaps since you make good purchase in Aqaba, you might give him gift of American MRE.”

I look at Bakr in the mirror. Pricks of sweat bead up on my forehead.  
“Certainly,” I say.

Bakr exits the Mahindra. He grows animated now, as if he and the officer are old buddies, and I get a strong impression that Bakr is putting on a show. He opens the door to the cargo area and retrieves an MRE, all the while sustaining the conversation. The officer claps the Mahindra with delight.  
“Shokran!”

“Afwan,” Bakr calls. He returns to his seat, and I notice that he is sweating.

I get the Mahindra back into fifth, and when the checkpoint is long since passed I glance at the two interpreters in the rearview mirror. Abed catches my eye and winks.

These are the lands of Moses, the lands he walked as a shepherd, the lands he wandered with the Hebrews. Forty years of wandering. When they first fled bondage in Egypt, Moses went up Mt. Sinai and sat in the presence of the

Lord. Forty days and nights he spent there, while the Hebrews stayed below, and in those forty days, while Moses received the law, the Hebrews lost their faith. They collected their gold, melted it down, and forged a golden calf, a new idol to protect them. Moses came down from the mount and could not comprehend it, could not understand why the Hebrews abandoned their faith. In punishment, he had three thousand slaughtered. Everyone remembers the golden calf; they forget the three thousand slaughtered. Now that I am here, I know: forty days is a long time to keep faith in the desert.

Gunny finally succumbs to sleep, and as I drive my mind wanders. I recall six months ago when we huddled around a folding table in a heavy-duty tent large enough for the battalion staff. A training exercise in Norway, with a foot of snow on the ground and cold slicing through the tent flaps. Iraq was drawing down, Afghanistan was over, but Syria had just begun. We drank weak coffee from styrofoam cups and bullshitted, waiting for the battalion commander to bring news.

“You know why I like sleeping out here in the freezing fucking cold?” Major Crews asked. “Cause it means I’m not sleeping on the fucking couch at home.”

From the range, the pop-pop-pop of machine guns rose above the Arctic winds. It was midnight before the battalion commander appeared, high cheekbones and jet black hair.

“Two rosters,” he said. “One for Syria, one for Jordan. A combat mission and an advisor mission. They’re splitting the battalion up. We’ll keep the platoons together as much as possible. Need the names of who’s going to Syria, who’s going to Jordan, and who’s staying in the rear.”

Two rosters, two missions. The majors started in on racking and stacking names. It quickly became a madhouse, officers fighting to get their marines on the Syria mission, to get themselves on the Syria mission. We all knew this was likely to be our last chance for combat, and ISIS made a good enemy, with its incoherent, indiscriminate violence. The debates devolved into meaningless arguments over rifle range scores and three-mile run times, or sometimes they were settled with the straightforward verdict: this guy’s a killer.



I put my name in the hat for Syria. I believed in the mission, and I would put my skin on the line for it. But I was never a killer, and I hardly needed to track the horse-trading to know how things would shake out. By the time Major Rossi took me aside and told me they needed me on the advisor mission, I'd already steeled myself for disappointment. Even so, when he patted me on the shoulder and walked away, I felt my throat knot, and I didn't speak again the rest of the night.

We don't stop for lunch, or for Bakr's mid-day prayers. Even so, I am nervous about finding the border marines. We have a grid coordinate and Gunny has a GPS watch, but the terrain will slow us down, and the days in February are short. Once we escape the Amman suburbs and get into northeast Jordan, I don't let off the gas. Out here, the packed earth gives way to volcanic rock, jagged boulders stretching unbroken into the distance. I exhale slowly, gobsmacked by the sight of it.

"The rock," I say, dumbly. "It's kind of beautiful."

Abed guffaws. "*This?* Captain, you are joking."

"I'm serious." I stare at the ocean of rock, at once desolate and magnificent. We pass several Bedouin leading a row of camels, their hooves hobbled with loose rope. Every Jordanian I've met despises the Bedouin, almost like a caste of untouchables, wandering the country and setting up their make-shift camps. I can't help but suspect that the derision is rooted more in fear than in hate: in the knowledge that only the Bedouins can survive in the dust.

"Captain," Abed is saying. "Do you know what is beautiful?"

He watches for my eyes in the rearview mirror.

"*Money*. Money is beautiful, Captain."

Gunny grunts. "That's one word for it."

Abed's eyebrows are alive, and he looks at me wildly in the rearview mirror, swallowed up in his Real Madrid jersey.

"Captain, I know you agree," he says. "Of course money is beautiful! Money is so beautiful. I make love to money. I take money and I save it and

I move to America for a second beautiful thing. You know what this second beautiful thing is, yes, Captain?”

“Abed, truly, I do not.”

“Of course you do! A nice sexy woman, with nice big tits, who I can fuck fuck fuck all day.”

I laugh, but Abed is utterly sincere. Bakr mutters something to Abed in Arabic and rubs his temples.

“Yes? No?” Abed says. “Like in the movies, yes? American marine, sexy wife, fuck all day?”

Gunny shakes his head. “I must be in the wrong unit.”

Several more Bedouin lead camels on the side of the highway, and further out, in a field of volcanic rock, a dozen Bedouin with many more camels gather around a well.

“Captain,” Abed says, insistent. “Captain, I know you come to Jordan for money.”

There is truth, to a degree, in Abed’s intuition. A deployment can be a financial windfall—no expenses, extra allowances, no taxes. And it feels cruel to deny this to Abed, for whom even a private’s pay would be a fortune. But it’s not about the money. At least, not entirely.

“Captain?” Bakr asks.

“Yes?”

“Why do you come to Jordan?”

“I volunteered,” I say, knowing it’s only half-true.

“And why do you volunteer?”

“I believed in what we were doing,” I say. “And I wanted to be a part of it.”

Bakr furrows his brow. “Yes, I see.”

“What do you see, habeebee?” Abed asks. Bakr leans forward and pats my shoulder.

“The Prophet teaches of the greedy man, that nothing can fill his mouth except the earth of his grave.” Bakr squeezes my shoulder. “Alhamdulillah, the Captain is a man of faith.”

In the distance, the volcanic rocks glare in reds and yellows, as if the desert itself is on fire.

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Ten miles from the border with Syria, I bring the Mahindra to a halt and check for other vehicles. We are alone, swallowed up by the gravel and the rock, the front wheels off the blacktop and in the wash of a wadi.

“Captain,” Abed says, “we are going into the desert?”

“Yes.”

“We have no escort?”

“Correct.”

Abed pales, his features expressionless. “This is very dangerous.”

Gunny and I glance at each other. The Mahindra vibrates and clanks as I navigate the wadi, using its banks as concealment.

Gunny turns around and grins. “Inshallah,” he says.

Bakr stares out the window with great concentration. “Inshallah,” he says to himself. “Yes. Yes, indeed.”

The sun melds with the horizon. I have hardly slept or eaten, at once wired and exhausted. My shirt clings to me. I try to focus, to think of nothing but the machine gun and the marines on the border. We can still make it to their position before dusk.

The wadi is bone dry, a hard crust left by the last pounding rain, however many years ago, when surging water carved out deep channels in the earth. We follow it north, towards the border, and when its course bends westward Gunny motions for me to keep our trajectory. I take the lip of the wadi too fast and the Mahindra lifts off the earth, the four of us momentarily weightless before lurching back into our seats.

“Captain,” Bakr says. “Yes?”

“There is a tan vehicle in the wadi parallel to us. Three o’clock.”

“Shit.”

I shift into fourth and accelerate. The Mahindra rattles violently. “Maybe they don’t see us.”

Thirty yards east, a tan Land Rover rises up and out of the wadi. It is jacked up on its axles with a heavy machine gun in the turret. I keep on our bearing, as if by refusing to acknowledge their presence they will do the same. But the Land Rover turns to intercept us. An officer in the

turret waves. When we do not slow he adjusts the machine gun on its pintle-mount and aims at the Mahindra.

I brake hard and the Mahindra skids over loose rock. None of us speak. The Land Rover slows ahead of us. They halt, and for a long pause no one moves. I imagine they are already on the radio, conveying our license plate and coordinates. Arranging with headquarters to render us to some gray, remote jailhouse. Two officers step down from the cab, armed with rifles and pistols on their thighs. Their movements are slow and assured. The machine gunner keeps his aim on our windshield.

Bakr raises both his hands through the window. "Salaam."

The officers do not respond.

"Tell them we're American, Bakr."

"Salaam," he says again.

"Tell them we're American."

Bakr and I make eye contact, and from the look on his face I am certain that he knows, and a pang of guilt hits me. Bakr turns back to the officers but they cut him off. The shorter of the two officers has a dark, full beard, and a slight paunch. He approaches the Mahindra and points directly at me while he shouts at Bakr and grows red in the face.

"He says, Captain, we are not permitted in the desert without an escort. He says he should arrest you."

The taller officer stands back from the Mahindra, and I can see from his stance and position that he is well-trained, that he is providing security for his partner, that these officers know what they are doing. The bearded officer barks another command.

"Captain, he says to exit the vehicle."

"We're *not* exiting the vehicle."

"He says to exit the vehicle immediately."

Both officers are now shouting, their hands on their rifles. My mind flashes absurdly on the tent in Norway, and the taste of weak coffee.

The Mahindra's back door opens. I turn to stop Bakr but he is still seated. Abed is in the dirt and then he is scrambling around the vehicle and gesturing madly, his neck taut, and at once everyone is shouting and pointing and spitting. Bakr shouts out the window and Abed shouts at the officers and

the officers shout at me and Gunny and the machine gunner shifts the gun from the Mahindra to Abed and back to the Mahindra.

And then, all at once, the shouting ends, and there is laughter. Abed draws a pack of cigarettes from his shirt pocket. With an air of majesty, he offers each of the officers a smoke. The bearded officer takes out a zip-po-style lighter and they each light up. The three of them stand quietly for a moment, as if the machine gun was not aimed at our windshield, as if moments ago they were not screaming at each other. The bearded officer tells a joke, and Abed laughs boisterously. The officers give us the thumbs up.

“What in the actual fuck?” Gunny whispers.

“Quiet, my friend,” says Bakr.

The officers return to their Land Rover. The heavy gun rests in its turret. Abed waits, smoking his cigarette, until the Land Rover kicks up dust and departs. He ambles back to his seat in the Mahindra, his cigarette spent, and with shaking hands he lights another. We sit silently in the smoke and in the smell of tobacco.

Abed draws deeply and pinches the cigarette between his twitching fingers. “I told them you are special operations, Captain. On a rescue mission.”

“Special operations? Abed, I’m a logistics officer.”

“Yes, well—to them, you are special operations officer.” He takes another long drag. “And we were lucky. Those officers? They are Real Madrid fans.” He smiles, and points the cigarette at himself. “You see, Captain? You are man of faith. I am man of action.” He laughs, and as I drop the Mahindra back into gear, I wonder if I understand the joke.

By the time the guard hut comes into view, the sun is a sliver on the horizon. I can hardly see through the dirt that coats the windshield. The obscured sight of marines on post sends a wave of relief over me. We park in the main lot, and I sit on the back bumper and drink from my canteen. It was a small thing, I think, to bring a machine gun here, but it was our thing, our role in a broader undertaking.

Soon, a lieutenant and staff sergeant appear. I remember the lieutenant from Norway, a stocky, big-handed infantryman, one of the first they

assigned to the Syria roster. He looks slimmer than he did in training, and darker. His uniform is filthy.

“I hear you brought us a 240.”

“Yeah.” I dig under the MREs and the blanket and heft the machine gun.

“Thanks, sir,” the staff sergeant says. “I’ll get this up on post.” He heads towards the border as the *pop-pop-pop* of a machine gun reverberates across camp.

The lieutenant stands with his thumbs hooked under his belt, his rifle slung across his back. He looks nonchalant, the kind of composure I imagine you get after combat. “So you came all the way from Durra in one day?”

“Yeah, one day.”

“You want a tour?”

Back in Norway we were both still lieutenants, and I notice now that he doesn’t call me sir. But I let it be. I want nothing more than to tour the camp, to walk the berm that marks the border and to look down the sights of a weapon aimed into Syria.

The camp is set a hundred yards back from the border on a relatively flat tract of desert. A few dozen canvas tents serve as barracks, their limp mattresses coated in stains. Three long trailers abut the tents: a chow hall, gym, and combat operations center. Everything is tan and dusty and half-broken. Around the perimeter, marines have dug trenches and built sandbag positions. There’s a small landing strip, which the lieutenant claims a C-130 can land on in extremis. A series of searchlights illuminate the border. The lieutenant points to the sector of the perimeter facing Syria. “There, there, and there are the machine gun positions.”

“How many do you take with you on patrol in Syria?”

The lieutenant gives me a funny look. “We defend the border. We don’t patrol in Syria.”

“Of course,” I say.

In one of the trenches, two PFCs wear their specialized coats and trousers to protect against chemical or biological attack.

“Why do they have their CBRN gear on?”

“It’s fucking cold out here,” the lieutenant says. “And these guys stand eight hour posts.”



“But the suits are only good for sixty days.”

“And the wind blows every goddamn night.”

The combat operations center is a single-wide trailer with the platoon’s communications equipment, a row of computers, and a large map of the area covered with color-coded pins.

The lieutenant motions me over to a lance corporal. “Show the captain the G-BOSS.”

“Have you seen a G-BOSS before, sir?” the lance corporal asks.

“Never.”

“It’s basically a hi-def camera on a pole. Infra-red, heat sensors, night vision. Gets jacked up maybe a hundred feet high so we can see across the border.”

He moves a joystick and the image on the screen pans. Its level of detail, even at night, is remarkable. He pans the camera further to a series of makeshift lean-tos and huts made from scraps of wood, metal, and cardboard.

“Who lives there?”

“Syrians. Mostly refugees. Some of them are ISIS.”

“How many are there?”

“Maybe three thousand?”

He pans further, revealing small alleys and footpaths and groups of refugees huddled around stoves and barrel fires. At the far edge of the camp mills a group of twenty or thirty children.

“The kids are maniacs,” the lieutenant says.

I lean in closer. The children huddle together. Some jump up and down. Then, three boys—maybe nine, ten years old—sprint towards the camera. In the bright searchlights and the high-definition clarity of the G-BOSS, they appear wild and feverish, with silent screaming mouths. They must be no more than a few hundred yards away, dashing directly for the border.

“Wait, what?”

“What’d I tell ya—maniacs.”

From outside, I hear the muffled *pop-pop-pop* of a machine gun. On screen, two of the boys jerk and retreat to the refugee camp. But the third boy continues toward the border, two, three, four more steps. He reaches down and draws a line in the dirt. *This far*. A second burst from the machine gun reverberates through the walls. *Pop-pop-pop*. I don’t stay to watch.

The hatch to the COC groans, its hinges corroded by sand. Outside, the wind whips the earth, lashes my exposed skin. The desert has long since given up the day's heat and I can feel the cold working its way into my bones. I walk out to the landing strip, away from the searchlights, away from the barracks and the marines and the interpreters, away from the Jordanian nationals who swab the urinals and serve omelets in the chow hall. The trailers recede behind me. Their dim lights wink in the night before they vanish. I stare into the distance, keep my eyes trained on the dark, and wait for my vision to adjust, for the desert to come into view. Camp Durra and Mt. Sinai feel a long ways off. I calculate that Moses could go up Mt. Sinai five times in the span of one deployment—five meetings with the Lord, five golden calves, five slaughters of those who lost their faith. Not until I begin to shake do I realize that my eyes have already adjusted, and there is nothing there to see.